NOSTALGIA, PESSIMISM, AND MALAISE

The Doomed Aristocrat in Late-Jeffersonian Virginia

by ROBERT P. SUTTON *

ON July 4, 1826, the jubilee of American independence, two venerable patriarchs of the young Republic, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, passed away. As the news spread across the land citizens everywhere lifted pens and voices in panegyrics to Jefferson, Adams, and all the noble Founding Fathers who had led the nation during its crucial, formative years. Virginians, in particular, apotheosized their famous patriots—Jefferson, Washington, Henry, Mason, Madison, Monroe.[1] Had not Virginia, under men like these, led the successful fight against tyranny to establish a government of free men? Had not Virginia bequeathed much to Nature's Republic: the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights? Had not Americans chosen four of their six presidents from the Old Dominion? The list of her glories seemed endless. But while Virginians toasted their illustrious past they sensed something was wrong; that the Virginia of the Revolution, like the Sage of Monticello himself, had passed away. Their doubts and misgivings were justified. Virginia, to borrow a phrase from Henry Adams, was no longer erect.[2]

During the last years of the Jeffersonian era, Virginia declined rapidly in wealth and influence to a position of secondary importance in the Union. In an age of dynamic national expansion "Old Virginia," afflicted with soil exhaustion, depression of tobacco prices in the world market, and increasing competition with new tobacco-growing regions of the West, lost steadily in both wealth and population. Between 1810 and 1840, 28 of the 62 counties east of the Blue Ridge showed a drop in the number of white inhabitants. In some areas the loss was severe. For example, in only two years time roughly 25 percent of the white landholders in Sussex County disappeared from the tax records. Land values in the state as a whole fell

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[1] For a first-rate account of the nation's reaction to the timely deaths of Jefferson and Adams see Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1962), Prologue; *cf.*, L. H. Butterfield, "The Jubilee of Independence July 4, 1826," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, LXI (1953), 119-140.

[2] Henry Adams wrote of Virginia in 1800: "The old Virginia society was still erect, priding itself on its resemblance to the society of England, which had produced Hampden and Chatham" (*History of the United States During the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* [New York, 1889-1891], I, 131).

from $206,000,000 in 1817 to $90,000,000 in 1829. And exports slumped from $9,000,000 to $3,000,000 in the same period. A slave worth $500 in 1820 could be sold ten years later for only $350. This was the time when "fatal defects," as one scholar has phrased it, appeared in the leadership of the Commonwealth. The planter aristocracy, which had so ably guided the state with reason and optimism in its days of glory, now, in the years of decline, became imbued with a deepening nostalgia, pessimism, and malaise.[3]

In private correspondence, public speeches, and in the fiction of the period the lament for Virginia in decline was everywhere heard. All that was good and worthwhile, the theme went, was lost in a never-to-be-recovered Golden Age (sometime around the Revolution) when high-minded Virginians had led a great people to found a new nation. But now, the picture was dismal indeed. Agriculture, the true foundation of Liberty, seemed in hopeless ruin. From outside the state, the planter's way of life was threatened by tariffs, banks, and federally-financed internal improvements. From within, the "Jacobinical" reformers of the Valley and Alleghany counties, by demanding a more democratic constitution for the Old Dominion, threatened the squirearchy with the tyranny of "King Numbers." James Mercer Garnett, a planter from Essex County, after a two-month tour of the state in 1827 wrote:

> We have made ourselves a tributary to the North and East—every day is augmenting our dependence. The state pride of the Ancient Dominion has become perfectly [defunct?]. . . . Virginia—poor Virginia furnishes a spectacle at present, which is enough to make the heart of her real Friends sick to the very core; the Education of her youth either neglected or perverted . . . her Agriculture nearly gone to ruin from a course of policy which could not well have been worse destructive if destruction had been its sole objective; her general politics degenerated into a scuffle almost universal for office and emolement. . . . I will would imply hope for better things, but hope is nearly dead, and I can see nothing in the perspective of the times calculated to renew it, or at least nothing which is not too slow in the operation to affect much in our time.[4]

Garnett was by no means a voice in the wilderness. The letters of his close friend John Randolph of Roanoke to William B. Giles, C. W. Gooch, Benjamin Watkins Leigh, Littleton Waller Tazewell and other eminent

[3] *United States Census*, 1810, 1840; Sussex County Land Tax Records, 1828, 1830; *Journal, Acts and Proceedings of a General Convention of the Commonwealth of Virginia* (Richmond, 1829), No. 7; Avery O. Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606-1860, University of Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences*, XII (1926), p. 124; Theodore M. Whitfield, *Slavery Agitation in Virginia, 1829-32* (Baltimore, 1930), p. 48. The phrase "fatal defects" is borrowed from Claude H. Hall, *Abel Parker Upshur, Conservative Virginian, 1790-1844* (Madison 1963), p. iii.

[4] James Mercer Garnett to John Randolph, October 16, 1827, Garnett-Randolph Papers, University of Virginia.

personages of the day are an elegy for a Virginia forever lost.[5] The once great Old Dominion, said Randolph, was in a wretched condition. With "soil and staples both worn out and a deadly climate in the bargain," he wrote, the state was "in a galloping consumption" which no remedy could cure.[6] "What times have we fallen upon," complained William Wirt to Dabney Carr in 1828.[7] "I am a disappointed man," Wirt wrote a few years later, "disappointed in my country and the glory that I thought awaited her."[8] John H. Cocke of "Bremo" in Fluvanna County believed that nothing could redeem Virginia "from the *curses* (for there are many) which in the wisdom and justice of Providence he has imposed upon it."[9] Abel Parker Upshur, planter-lawyer from the Eastern Shore, complained: "Why should Virginia, hitherto distinguished alike for the soundness of her views and the greatness of her talents, sink to second or third rank in the Confederacy?"[10]

In the fiction of late-Jeffersonian Virginia, the motif of ruin and desolation was so fixed that according to one authority its recitation became "a kind of ritual."[11] With dramatic hyperbole writers portrayed the decayed plantation and the doomed aristocrat. The master of Raby Hall in Nathaniel Beverley Tucker's *George Balcombe,* after squandering his diminishing income, lived in penury on a dilapidated plantation in Essex County.[12] The Grayson family of George Tucker's *Valley of Shenandoah* was forced to move from the Tidewater to the Valley in order to make a new start, but even then debt and ruin pursued them. The impoverishment which confronted Edward Grayson when he returned to the family homestead in Charles City County was overwhelming:

> The sight of this venerable seat of his ancestors reminded him of the fall of his family from their former opulance and consequence to the most absolute poverty; and the tender and not unpleasing melancholy he had formerly experienced, was exchanged for a bitterness of feeling, and soreness of heart, which had nothing in it consolatory or agreeable. . . . [The plantation] was now in a state of evident delapidation. Most

[5] John Randolph Papers, University of Virginia, Virginia Historical Society, Virginia State Library, Library of Congress; Gooch Family Papers, University of Virginia; Tazewell Family Papers, Virginia State Library; William B. Giles Papers, Goode Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

[6] John Randolph to J. R. Randolph, April 7, 1830, John Randolph Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

[7] John Pendleton Kennedy, *Memoirs of the Life of William Wirt, Attorney General of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1849), II, 303.

[8] *Ibid.,* II, 374.

[9] John H. Cocke to Philip Cocke, December 3, 1835, Cocke Papers, Johnston Deposit, University of Virginia.

[10] Quoted in Hall, *Upshur,* p. 32.

[11] William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee* (New York, 1961), p. 154.

[12] Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, *George Balcombe* (New York, 1836), II, 133-135.

of the windows wanted some panes of glass, and in a few, the sashes themselves were broken out. Several of the outer doors had rotted at the bottoms, as had also the threshold and the window sills. Moss had grown about the steps, and the stones of which they were made, either sunk in, or, by the gradual action of frost and vegetation, had been moved from their original places, and afforded between their interstices nourishment for the plantain, the dock, and dandelion, and underneath them, an asylum for lizards, frogs, and toads.[13]

Many contemporary novels on plantation life in Virginia during the 1820's and 1830's give the impression that, compared to the planter of colonial days, the present generation of aristocrats was morally degenerate. In the *Valley of Shenandoah,* Colonel Grayson, the "ancient cavalier" with his hospitality, affluence, and grace, is already dead when the book opens. His kind, Tucker seemed to say, was gone forever; no more could one find in the Old Dominion the true "old-fashioned gentlemen" who were

remarkable for their urbanity, frankness, and ease; a nice sense of humour; a hatred of all that was little or mean, more fond of hospitality than show; great epicurres at table; great lovers of Madeira wine, of horses and dogs; free at jest . . . with a goodly store of family pride, and a moderate portion of learning . . . scrupulously neat in their persons, but affecting plainess and simplicity in their dress; kind and indulgent, rather than faithful husbands.[14]

In the *Valley of Shenandoah* the second-rate sons of the "ancient cavaliers" had little future in the Commonwealth. Their only hope was to do as so many other Virginians had done, move west and begin anew. Upon meeting a tenant family from the Northern Neck headed for Kentucky, young Grayson was surprised to find them not at all unhappy over the prospect of leaving Virginia. On the contrary, they were "even full of lively hope, from the plenty they expected to enjoy, and the favourable expectations we naturally form of the future, where the imagination is free to shape it out."[15]

Virginia writers, in their nostalgia for a lost Golden Age, idealized the statesmen who once had led the Old Dominion as unblemished paragons of civic virtue. William Wirt's biography of Patrick Henry, for example, paints a utopian Virginia where super heroes guided the state with unfailing wisdom and selfless devotion to duty. Wirt believed that the

[13] George Tucker, *Valley of Shenandoah: or Memoirs of the Graysons* (New York, 1824), II, 31-32. For a brief examination of Tucker's writings as historical sources see Tipton R. Snavely, "George Tucker as Historian," *Proceedings* of the Virginia Social Science Association, 37th annual meeting, pp. 47-53.

[14] Tucker, *Valley of Shenandoah,* II, 105. William R. Taylor writes of the young Virginia planter: "His characteristic improvidence, his almost childish impetuousness and irresponsibility, his lack of enterprise and his failure to move with the times—spell his doom (*Cavalier and Yankee,* p. 154).

[15] Tucker, *Valley of Shenandoah,* II, 12-13.

Virginia of the Revolution was like the Rome of the early Republic, and he presented Henry as Virginia's Cicero, the symbol of the state's highest aspirations. Great had been the expectations of Virginians "in those days of genuine patriotism" when "there existed a mutual and noble confidence."[16] And great was the disappointment at what had transpired since the Revolution. "How little does any House [of Delegates] that we have had for some years past," Wirt mused, "resemble the House in which Jefferson, Pendleton, Henry, Richard H. Lee, Wythe, Bland, and others were members?"[17] Or, as Beverley Tucker put it in his novel the *Partisan Leader,* published in 1836:

> From that time the land of Washington, and Henry, and Mason, of Jefferson, Madison, and Randolph, sunk to the rank of a province, administered and managed by the Riveses and Ritchies, the Barbours and Stevensons, the Watkinses and Wilsons, whose chance to be remembered in history depends . . . on the glories of that temple of liberty which they first desecrated and then destroyed.[18]

The declining planter in the fiction of the period almost always blamed his troubles on malignant forces from outside "Old Virginia." When a gentleman farmer in the *Partisan Leader* was asked what had brought such desolation upon the old families, he said federal "misgovernment." "But may not the fault be in the people themselves?" a traveler asked. "The fault of submitting to be misgoverned, certainly," the planter replied, "but no more than that."[19] "Things are getting worse and worse," complained another planter in John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn.* "I can see how it's going. What's the use of states if they are all going to be cut up with canals and railroads and tariffs. NO. NO. Gentlemen! you may depend, Old Virginny's not going to let Congress carry on in her day."[20]

With Virginia in decline, threatened by ever more powerful hostile forces, many planters felt that they stood, as John Tyler wrote, "on an awful precipice."[21] A sense of irrepressible conflict between "Old Virginia" and her

[16] William Wirt, *Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry* (Philadelphia, 1817), p. 125.

[17] Kennedy, *Wirt,* I, 261.

[18] Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, *The Partisan Leader: A Novel and an Apocalypse of the Origin and Struggles of the Southern Confederacy* (first published in Washington, 1836. New York, 1864 edition), p. 39.

[19] *Ibid.,* p. 249.

[20] John Pendleton Kennedy, *Swallow Barn* (Philadelphia, 1860), p. 164, first published in 1832. Charles H. Bohner's interesting article "Swallow Barn: John P. Kennedy's Chronicles of Virginia Society," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography,* LXVIII (1960), 317-330 examines Kennedy's boyhood experiences on a plantation in the Valley and its effect on the setting of the novel.

[21] John Tyler to Dr. Henry Curtis, March 18, 1828, printed in Lyon C. Tyler, *The Letters and Times of the Tylers* (Richmond, 1885), I, 383-387.

enemies was clearly brought out in the apocalyptic *Partisan Leader,* which depicted an inevitable civil war in which the South, led by Virginia, rose to throw off the tyranny of the northern-controlled federal government. Agriculture and slavery were pitted against manufacturing and capitalism, and a "fixed tax-paying minority" struggled valiantly against the superior strength of a "fixed tax-receiving majority."[22] With a ringing manifesto Beverley Tucker voiced, albeit in exaggerated form, the belligerence which by the 1830's had become a part of the mentality of the Virginia squirearchy.

> Let [my story] go forth as the first *Bulletin* of that gallant contest, in which Virginia achieved her independence; lifted the soiled banner of her sovereignty from the dust, and once more vindicated her proud motto, which graces my title page,—SIC SEMPER TYRANNIS! AMEN.[23]

The planter's contentious pride, his yearning for the past, his malaise about the future strikingly expressed in the literature and private writings of the 1820's and 1830's also permeated the rhetoric of his public speeches. Nowhere can this nostalgia and pessimism better be seen than in the debates of the Constitutional Convention of 1829-1830. This great forensic exhibition brought to the surface all the apprehensions, beliefs, and aspirations of the planter aristocracy as they had formed by the end of the Jeffersonian era. Moreover, the debates give the historian a unique opportunity to see the degree to which the frustrations felt by the gentry in the wake of "Old Virginia's" decline had united the lowland squirearchy in an all-out defense of the status quo. Ironically, in the battle against innovation and change the planters found themselves champions of a political ideology directly contradicting the beliefs of an era they so admired and longed to restore. In the speeches of eastern delegates it is apparent that the optimism of the Jeffersonian age, its concern for natural law, popular sovereignty, and equal rights had been discarded in favor of minority rights, conservativism, constitutional restraints on the popular will, and above all, protection of property—slave property.

John Randolph of Roanoke, delegate to the Convention from Charlotte County, gave public expression to the bitterness and despair which pervaded his private correspondence when he lamented that Virginia in her present condition was like King Lear, "an old and feeble monarch" abandoned by her children.[24] Benjamin Watkins Leigh of Richmond asked:

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[22] Beverley Tucker, *Partisan Leader,* p. 246.

[23] *Ibid.,* p. 392.

[24] *Proceedings and Debates of the Virginia State Convention of* 1829-30 (Richmond, 1830), p. 321.

"Where . . . are our arts, our literature, our manufactures, our commerce? . . . What has become of our political rank and eminence in the Union?" he continued, "whither has the Genius of Virginia fled? . . . Virginia has declined and is declining—she was once the first state in the Union—now she has sunk to be the third, and will soon sink lower in the scale."[25] And like the ruined but still haughty planter of the novel, Philip N. Nicholas of Petersburg asserted that even though "retrograding in wealth and influence," Virginians had one proud consolation. "If we *have* refused the lures and boons of the General Government," he said, "we are at least poor on principle." "Virginia," asserted Nicholas, was only a "victim to her honour."[26]

Like the planters soon to appear in *Swallow Barn* or *Partisan Leader*, eastern delegates insisted that the source of Virginia's woes was external—northern capitalism ("yankee greed" they called it), protective tariffs, and federal schemes for internal improvements. All troubles facing the Old Dominion came from the North, they maintained, and like a fatal disease entered the Commonwealth through the western part of the state to infect the body politic. "It is remarkable," said Benjamin Watkins Leigh, "that, if any evil, physical or moral . . . if any plague originate in the North, it is sure to spread to the South and invade us sooner or later: the influenza—the smallpox—the varioloid—the Hession fly—the Circuit Court system—Universal suffrage, all come from the North—and they always cross above the falls of the great rivers."[27]

As the Virginia of Beverley Tucker's *Partisan Leader* led the South in revolt against northern tyranny, so "Old Virginia" in the minds of eastern delegates was holding the line against those alien forces mounted to destroy the planter's way of life. If Virginia planters gave up the point to the enemy in 1829, said Richard B. Morris of Hanover County, the rest of the South might abandon hope for the future.[28] "Alone and unsupported" if necessary, Randolph avowed, eastern slaveholders would carry on the fight. Clearly, to lowland delegates, the day of final reckoning had to come, even if it meant disunion itself. "Surely," said Governor William B. Giles, "such danger must be visible to all, when they see this array of force presented against force."[29]

The Virginia gentry, alarmed by the steady regression of their state, adhered all the more stubbornly to principles they believed could prevent

[25] *Proceedings and Debates*, pp. 404-405.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 324.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 407.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 111.
[29] *Ibid.*, p. 253.

further deterioration. Since the planters saw centralization of power in the federal government as one of the chief dangers, they turned to a set of maxims which directly challenged the legitimacy of this consolidation. As a result, the "principles of '98," the doctrines of states' rights contained in the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, became in the 1820's the foundation of intellectual orthodoxy for Virginia's squirearchy.

Judge Spencer Roane, in his writings against the expanding power of the federal judiciary, was one of the first to hold forth the panacea of states' rights to Virginians in the late-Jeffersonian period. In the "Hampden" and "Sydney" essays, first printed in the Richmond *Enquirer* in 1819, he declared that the federal government had only the several explicit powers delegated to it by the states.[30] Another early partisan of states' rights, widely read by Virginia planters, was John Taylor of Caroline. In his works on political economy, this "Southern Jeremiah" attacked national consolidation as a violation of the Constitution of the United States. Sovereignty, he argued, resided in the people of the several states; this sovereignty had never been taken from them or been surrendered, and consequently the national government was, in fact, the servant of the states.[31] The delicate balance between central and local power, which Taylor thought the genius of the Founding Fathers, offered the only security against exploitation and tyranny. The current tendency of the national government to expand its power at the expense of the states had plundered the farmer for the benefit of the factory. Agriculture itself was threatened with destruction and the entire way of life of the Virginia slaveholding farmer was in jeopardy. The only defense for the planter was to insist that the federal balance be respected and to assert the legitimate rights of the states against creeping consolidation.[32]

Disciples of Roane and Taylor were leaders of the eastern delegation at the Convention of 1829-1830. The excessive legalism which these men had used earlier to defend minority rights against the national government was directed in 1829 against Virginians from the western part of the state who demanded reforms in the Commonwealth's aristocratic system of government. The debates illustrate how the planter, by the end of the Jeffer-

[30] For the "Hampden" and "Sydney" essays see the Richmond *Enquirer*, March-April, 1819; May-June 1821. *cf.*, Norman K. Risjord, *The Old Republicans: Southern Conservativism in the Age of Jefferson* (New York, 1965), pp. 223-226; Rex Beach, "Judge Spencer Roane," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 2nd ser., XXII (1942), 1-17; Albert J. Beveridge, *Life of John Marshall* (Boston, 1916), IV, 314-329, 359.

[31] John Taylor, *An Inquiry into the Principles and Policy of the Government of the United States* (Fredericksburg, 1814), p. 425; by the same author, *Construction Construed, and Constitutions Vindicated* (Richmond, 1820), pp. 37, 46-47, 214.

[32] John Taylor, *Tyranny Unmasked* (Washington, 1822), pp. 52, 89, 132, 201, 207, 291.

sonian era, tended to combine in one menacing image the federal government and those Virginians pushing for constitutional change. Eastern delegates openly charged reformers with being in league with adversaries, seen and unseen, who were using the power of the national government to destroy at once the rights of states and the plantation system.[33] Lowland delegates said that reformers really wanted the political advantages which certain constitutional changes in representation and suffrage would give them in order to "hitch Virginia to the Federal car" and "overturn the doctrine of States Rights." Give the reformers what they want, predicted Governor Giles, and "the effects must be the annihilation of all States rights —the destruction of the State Governments—and more, the amalgamation of a great mass of power in the Federal Government." "The best we could hope [for]," he warned, "would be a consolidated despotism."[34]

Eastern planters saw other imminent threats to Republican government and ordered society. The wave of egalitarian sentiment spreading throughout the nation in the 1820's, writes one scholar, left many Virginia planters "feeling that they were sitting on top of a potential volcano," which would soon erupt with all the excess of the French Revolution.[35] If current trends toward democracy continued, William Wirt predicted in 1830, the Republic "will degenerate into a mob . . . your People will become horses ready saddled and bridled to be mounted at pleasure by every bold and crafty adventurer who chooses to boot and spur himself for the occasion: and you will rush first to anarchy, and then emerge from it in the form of despotism."[36] "I confess *I am afraid,*" said planter John C. Coalter, delegate to the Convention from King George County, afraid of "the epidemic which prevails in the country." "Who is there then who is not afraid?" Coalter asked.[37] All the evils and bloodshed of "Jacobinical democracy" were charged against reformers, who replied with no small insight into the mind of their planter opponents: "the dangers so much dreaded by [eastern] gentlemen, are the creatures of their own imagination."[38]

To the lowland aristocracy one of the major bulwarks against the chaos of egalitarianism was the freehold suffrage. Only a limited number of the citizenry, planters argued, possessed sufficient virtue and interest in the community to be entrusted with the franchise. And only so long as

[33] See for example the speech of William B. Giles, *Proceedings and Debates,* pp. 246-256.
[34] *Ibid.,* p. 237.
[35] Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee,* p. 64.
[36] William Wirt, *An Address Delivered Before the Perthessoplian and Philoclean Societies of Rutgers College* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1830), p. 14. In this particular part of the address, Wirt was paraphrasing Jefferson.
[37] *Proceedings and Debates,* p. 454.
[38] *Ibid.,* p. 419.

government was kept in their hands could Virginia be assured of security and order. Who constituted this special class entrusted with the safety of republican institutions? The yeoman farmer. It was the freehold farmer who alone possessed simple virtues, enterprise, instinctive patriotism, and untaught wisdom.[39] "Land is the best and only solid, indestructable foundation for Government," said Governor Giles.[40] Philip N. Nicholas on the floor of the Convention summarized the romanticized view of the Virginia yeomanry which the gentry had adopted, along with states' rights, as the best defense against anarchy, tyranny, and democracy.

> I do believe, if there are any chosen people of God, they are the cultivators of the soil. If there be virtue to be found any where, it would be amongst the middleing farmers, who constitute the yeomanry, the bone and sinew of our country. Sir, they are men of moderate desires . . . they are not harassed by envy, by the love of show and splendor, nor agitated by the restless and insatiable passion of ambition. . . . It is a fact, that our voters are less exposed to influence and intrigue, than any, I believe, in the United States. . . . Ask one of our freeholders whose man he is, he will tell you he is his own man. These men know that their land is their own, that they are the lords of the soil; that . . . their house is their castle, and that no man dare invade either, with impunity.[41]

Thus it was that the concept of the yeoman farmer, which in Jefferson's day had been associated with democracy, was used by eastern planters to block democratic reforms. Extend the suffrage to anyone but the yeoman freeholder, they argued, and disaster must follow. Give the "vagabonds and that rabble who hang loosely on society" a voice in governing the state, Randolph warned, and oppression of "King Numbers" would result.[42] Remove the freehold qualification, said Benjamin Watkins Leigh, and the "liberty of Virginia" would expire with the excess of democracy.[43]

Such reasoning on the part of the eastern gentry at the Convention of 1829-1830 showed how Virginia planters, in an effort to preserve their way of life against genuine and imagined enemies, had abandoned Jefferson and many of the ideals for which he stood. Clearly, in the planter-dominated East the "house that Jefferson built"—natural law, natural rights, and popular sovereignty—had collapsed.[44] To men like Randolph, Giles, and Benjamin Watkins Leigh, natural rights were "metaphysical subtleties" which endangered republican government and ordered society. Declared

[39] Beverley Tucker, *Partisan Leader*, dedication.
[40] *Proceedings and Debates*, p. 240.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 366.
[42] *Ibid.*, p. 443.
[43] *Ibid.*, p. 173.
[44] Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Democracy, Liberty, and Property: the State Constitutional Conventions of the 1820's* (Indianapolis, 1966), p. 285.

Abel P. Upshur in 1829, "there is no original a priori principle in the law of nature, which gives to a majority a right to control a minority. . . . In truth . . . there are no original principles of Government at all."[45]

In the last years of the Jeffersonian era, therefore, a proud, conservative plantation aristocracy looked upon their world with apprehension and suspicion. They saw themselves threatened from without and within by forces that soon would destroy all they held dear—the integrity of the Commonwealth, the agrarian style of life based on the model of the "ancient cavalier." But there was one more important factor operating upon the psyche of the planter which must be considered if one is to account for the almost paranoid tone found in the rhetoric of the lowland delegates at the Convention of 1829-1830. This factor was the institution of chattel slavery.[46]

Increasing at a prodigious rate during the first three decades of the nineteenth century, Virginia's Negro population was literally bottled up in the area east of the Blue Ridge. And whites of this region looked at the ever-growing number of blacks with a strange binocular vision. On the one hand, as the fiction of the period illustrates, they saw happy, affectionate slaves, contented with their lot. On the other hand, there was a deep-rooted fear that the slaves would rise up, throw off their bonds, and embark on a race war. A balanced picture of slavery—that slaves were neither completely docile servants nor seething with the spirit of revolt—somehow escaped most planters during the late-Jeffersonian years. As a result, the gentry began to vacillate between romantic idealism and near panic whenever the subject of slavery came to the fore. And portentous signs of what was to come in the Southern attitude toward slavery already were apparent in "Old Virginia" by 1830: a defense of slavery as a positive good, a hypersensitivity to criticism of slaveholders, and the image of racial holocaust—of black terror. As far as slavery was concerned, the aristocracy was convinced that "their time was running out."[47]

The best source for the romanticized view of the slave are the novels of

[45] *Proceedings and Debates,* pp. 66, 69.

[46] The concept of "paranoid style" is borrowed from Richard Hofstadter's essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" which first appeared in *Harpers Magazine,* November 1964 and later was reprinted in revised form by Alfred A. Knopf in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York, 1965), pp. 3-41. The paranoid style as defined by Hofstadter can be seen among those politicians to whom the "feeling of persecution is central, and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy." Such politicians tend to be "over suspicious, over aggressive, grandiose, and apolyptic in expression" and see the "hostile and conspiratorial world" directed not at themselves as individuals but against "a nation, a culture, a way of life." Finally, "his sense that his political passions are unselfish and patriotic, in fact, goes far to intensify his feeling of righteousness and his moral indignation."

[47] Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee,* p. 64.

the day.[48] The Negro in fiction was a child. His life was filled with carefree joy. The master was indulgent, kind, considerate; the slave was affectionate, loyal, and somewhat irresponsible. In Kennedy's *Swallow Barn,* for instance, the slavequarter exuded an "air of contentment and good humor and kind family attachment." The Negroes, Kennedy wrote, "never could become a happier people."[49] George Tucker, in the *Valley of Shenandoah,* observed that the slaves "are better supplied with the necessaries of life than the labouring class of any country . . . and probably enjoy as much happiness, with as few drawbacks, as any other class of our population."[50] Beverley Tucker, several years later, defended slavery as beneficial to the Negro. To those who would condemn the institution, he said in the *Partisan Leader*:

> They have not the qualities which would enable them to comprehend the negro character. Their calculating selfishness can never understand his disinterested devotion . . . they think our friend Jack here to be such as themselves, and cannot therefore conceive that he is not ready to cut his master's throat, if there is anything to be got by it. They know no more of the feelings of our slaves, than their fathers could comprehend of the loyalty of the gallant cavaliers from which we spring. . . . They have presumed upon the difference between us, and heaped oppression on oppression until we can bear no more.[51]

Yet in the same novels which present the sentimental picture of slavery there was the notion that, if provoked, the slave would indeed rise "to cut his master's throat." "Leave the negroes alone," said a planter in *George Balcombe,* "leave them in their humility, their grateful affection."[52] If theories of equality were spread among them or emancipators had the chance to try their schemes, warned Edward Grayson in *Valley of Shenandoah,* Virginia would see "the scenes which made St. Domingo one general scene of waste and butchery."[53] The planters' trepidation of a slave uprising was subtly caught in a scene in *Swallow Barn* where Ned Hazard, the young master, tells a group of Virginians "to keep a lynx-eyed gaze upon that serpent-like ambition which would convert the government at Washington into Aaron's rod, to swallow up the independence of their native state." This

[48] For an account of the sentimentalized view of the Negro in Southern literature see Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee,* Chapter IX.

[49] Kennedy, *Swallow Barn,* pp. 452-453.

[50] George Tucker, *Valley of Shenandoah,* p. 64. It is interesting that the view of slavery as a positive good for the master was absent from these early novels. This stage of the slavery defense came later in the writings of those who justified the institution on biblical, legal, or historical grounds.

[51] Beverley Tucker, *Partisan Leader,* pp. 205-206.

[52] Beverley Tucker, *George Balcombe,* II, 166.

[53] George Tucker, *Valley of Shenandoah,* p. 631.

remark prompted the genial Negro groom Cary, who was listening close by, to reply, "Look out, Master Ned! Aaron's rod a black snake in Old Virginny!"[54]

These novels reflected three decades of growing uneasiness over the possibility of a race war in Virginia. Sparked by the gruesome details of the slave revolt in the West Indies in the 1790's, latent fears of Virginia slaveholders were heightened by isolated instances of Negro unrest. In 1800 planters were told that a planned insurrection in Hanover County was prevented by the timely information advanced by a loyal slave. In 1822 a free Negro of Goochland County revealed another slave conspiracy. And two years later, a Henrico County resident notified the legislature that he had checked a slave uprising only through the assistance of a free Negro, Lewis Borlaugh. The mayor of Richmond, early in 1830, came across thirty copies of an inflamatory pamphlet written by northern free black, David Walker.[55] Governor Giles, in his annual message to the General Assembly in 1829, expressed official concern over the "spirit of dissatisfaction and insubordination" that prevailed among the slave population.[56] Thus, before the Nat Turner massacre, which historians commonly cite as the starting point of the hysteria over slave insurrection in Virginia, many residents of the eastern part of the state believed that the awful nightmare of a racial holocaust was about to descend on the Old Dominion.

The debates of the Convention of 1829-1830 echoed this ever-growing fear of servile insurrection. Again and again eastern delegates alluded to the inevitable slave uprising that would follow any tampering with the institution. Tidewater planter Richard B. Morris charged that western reformers were trying to gain political power by constitutional reform in order to attack slavery either indirectly by a tax law or directly "by the passage of a law of emancipation." There could be only one result of such a course of action, he said. "Soon a sword will be unsheathed, that will be red with the best blood of this country, before it finds the scabbard."[57] There were those in Virginia, said Robert Stanard of Richmond, who "with

[54] Kennedy, *Swallow Barn*, p. 75. For detailed discussion of the fear of a slave revolt in Virginia during this period see Keith M. Bailor, "John Taylor of Caroline: Continuity, Change, and Discontinuity in Virginia's Sentiments towards Slavery, 1790-1820," *VMHB*, LXXV (1967), 290-304.

[55] David Walker, *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble to the Colored Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly to those of the United States of America. Written in Boston, in the State of Massachusetts, Sept. 28, 1829* (Boston, 1829).

[56] *Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia* [December 1829] (Richmond, 1829), p. 8.

[57] *Proceedings and Debates*, p. 116.

malignant purposes, or under the stimulation of misguided philanthropy, industriously spread a contagion which no power may be able to arrest." The property which the planters were trying to protect, he continued, was not "brute matter" but beings "that have passions to be inflamed, hearts to feel . . . and who are capable of catching the flame of . . . agitators, if not here, at least in other parts of the State" and who may very easily be aroused to bring on the "ravages of a servile war."[58] He demanded reformers cease their "callous indifference" to the "mighty dangers" to which slavery exposes the masters. If they did not change their ways, Stanard predicted, then

> There will be concert and combination. Stimulated by the feelings produced by that most intolerable evil, and ever-present sense of insecurity, [the East] will regard [the western reformers] with fierce and angry hostility, and every collision will heat the blood, and tend to melt into one common mass, all their interests and passions, and then the two divisions of the State will stand confronted with each other; with passions aroused; fraternal feelings exasperated into bitterness; and then the minority in the East, impelled by one feeling, and directed by one common will, will [be fused] . . . as it were, into one body having but one soul.[59]

John Randolph of Roanoke, in the last weeks of debate, combined all the frenzy and perturbation rising to the surface among the Virginia slaveholding aristocracy in a tirade against the reformers.

> [If] representation had been established upon the basis of white population . . . in less than twenty years, you would have seen a Bill brought into the House of Burgesses for the emancipation of every slave in Virginia. . . . I would as lief trust the Fanatics of Free-masons Hall, London. . . . as the Fanatics in Virginia. Sir, have you not good reason to believe—nay, do you not know—that petitions were preparing for the purpose of being presented to this body on that subject? I have nothing to do with the consciences of men. The abolitionist is as free to hold his opinions as I am to hold mine. . . . But I never will suffer him to put a torch to my property, that he may slake it in the blood of all that are dear to me. I will arrest his hand if I can—by reason if I can—but if not, by force. This is the whole question—Shall representation [in Virginia's legislature] be on the terms and principles which the Constitution of the United States requires? If we say NO [it amounts] . . . almost to the direct affirmation—that this part of the Constitution of the United States, Virginia stands ready to give up. . . . The abandonment of it by that part of Virginia directly interested in it, and in the preservation of that property for themselves, their wives and their children . . . will be a declaration to all the world, that we are ready to surrender the question to the first Peter the Hermit, who shall cross the mountains with "Universal Emancipation" on his flag.[60]

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[58] *Proceedings and Debates*, p. 306.

[59] *Ibid.*, p. 312.

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 858.

The attitude of the lowland gentry in the Convention of 1829-1830 toward slavery brought out in sharp relief the chasm which separated them intellectually and emotionally from the "ancient cavalier" of the eighteenth century. Faced with Virginia's, and their own, rapid decline, they sought to adjust to a transformation caused by forces only dimly understood. In the frustration and bewilderment brought on by this crisis of identity, the planter aristocracy lost much of the moderation and balance which characterized the gentry of Jefferson's day. The Virginia squirearchy of the 1820's and 1830's came to cast their world in terms of unrealistic alternatives —things were either unblemished, felicitous, noble, ordered, and good (Revolutionary Virginia, the yeoman freeholder, the happy slave) or they were hostile, malignant, conspiratorial, chaotic, and evil (national consolidation, reformers and their democratic ideas, slavery and race war). In a word, romantic exaggeration, obstructionism, suspicion, and phobia had become the stock-in-trade of a class convinced that only the past was of any worth and that the future held only thwarted hopes and ultimate disaster.

It is no accident that the most popular one-time Jeffersonian at the Convention of 1829-1830 in the eyes of the eastern aristocracy was the eccentric John Randolph of Roanoke. Perhaps Randolph, with his twisted version of Jeffersonianism, was so appealing to the planter gentry because more than anyone else he personified the doomed aristocrat and the tragic decline of "Old Virginia." In any event, in the vituperative and bellicose convention rhetoric of Randolph and the young politicians who aped him one begins to discern the significance of the change which had taken place in Virginia during the years between the War of 1812 and the presidency of Andrew Jackson. One thing is evident. That even as the aged James Madison rose on that clear day on October 1829 to nominate his friend James Monroe as president of the state's first constitutional convention since the Revolution, the Virginia for which the two men stood—the Virginia of Thomas Jefferson—was no more.